

**ZIONSVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**REV. JIM CAPPS- MARCH 25, 2012**

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**“TRIED”**

**JOHN 18:28-40**

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Sport fans around the world can rely on one fact about their sport: the home team wins more often than the visiting team. A 2011 *Sports Illustrated* article concludes: “Home field advantage is no myth. Indisputably, it exists... Across all sports and at all events, from Japanese baseball to Brazilian soccer to the NFL, the team hosting the game wins more than not.” What explains this fact?

A wealth of evidence disputes the most common theories behind home team advantage. For instance, thousands of cheering or jeering fans didn’t change the team’s performance. On a number of statistics- such as pitch of velocity in baseball or free throw percentage in basketball (which over decades was 75.9 percent for home and visiting teams)—home team advantage didn’t make a difference. Their research also eliminated other likely theories based on the rigors of travel for visiting teams or the home team’s familiarity with their field, rink, or court.

So what drives home field advantage? According to the authors of the article, “Officials’ bias is the most significant contribution to home field advantage.” In short, the refs don’t like to get booed. So when the game gets close, they call fewer fouls or penalties against the home team; or they call more strikes against visiting batters. Larger and louder fans really do influence the calls from the officials. The refs naturally (and often unconsciously) respond to the pressure from the crowd. Then they try to please the angry fans and make the calls that will lessen the pain of the crowd disapproval. In the end, the ref’s people pleasing response can have an impact on the final result of the game.

While far from being an athletic event, the sounds of the frenzied crowd had a huge bearing on the outcome of the courtroom drama depicted at the end of John 18 and the beginning of chapter 19. The judge who has to make the final call in the case of The Sanhedrin vs. Jesus of Nazareth is clearly influenced by the vehemence of the religious leaders as well as the crowd whom they have whipped up into a kind of “mob” mentality. While the Roman Governor, Pilate, clearly wants to do the right thing, he bends to the pressure of the deafening noise of the spectators.

As we continue this “Countdown to the Cross” please follow along with me as I read from the first part of that courtroom drama in John 18:28-40.

Pay attention to 1 group and 2 individuals who will step into the spotlight as they play out their major roles. Also, pay close attention to see if you see yourself or your group playing a part in this stirring courtroom drama.

Read John 18:28-40

### **THE FIRST PLAYERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT ARE THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS.**

These first players are the same people we have seen in action in previous weeks. In a nutshell, they are clearly threatened and frightened by the young Galilean Rabbi named Jesus. He doesn't have the proper pedigree or credentials to be doing and saying all that for which He has become legendary in only a few short years. In their eyes, Jesus is a fraud.

Jesus would not be such a huge problem if He were not so popular and well-received by people across the societal spectrum. He is preaching with passion, teaching with astounding authority and even healing people with tenderness and compassion. Alarming numbers of people are following Him. He has become a kind of folk-hero to the masses.

While all of that was bad enough, there was something even more serious. Jesus, time and time again, has spoken against the religious leaders. He was undermining their authority. He clearly hit a raw nerve when he called these leaders "whitened tombs," that is looking nice on the outside, but dead and decaying on the inside.

While it had seemed imperative to get rid of Jesus in some way at some time soon, he switched them to panic mode when he overthrew the tables and chased out the money changers from the Temple. That was one of those moments when he crossed the line. In order to preserve their way of life, Jesus had to go.

So as we look at this troubled group of men in the spotlight carrying out their plan to have Jesus executed, we have to shake our heads in amazement. Knowing what we know this side of Easter, they had no idea that Jesus was orchestrating all that was taking place. From the betrayal by Judas, to the illegal hearing in front of Annas, even to that very moment before the Roman Governor, Pilate, they were carrying out God's plan.

When we look closely at these religious leaders we can see fear, hatred, jealousy, and paranoia written all over their faces. Yet they are still trying to look good and appear to be keeping the Law. We can't help but notice that these same men who have broken all kinds of laws to bring down Jesus, they don't enter into Pilate's quarters. They don't want to "defile" themselves for the celebration of the Passover. There clearly is a double standard in place. We feel like shouting at them like we might at a villain in a melodrama, "You hypocrites!" We are incredulous that they could do all of this in the name of serving God.

Yet, as I watch with a kind of righteous indignation and disdain, I get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach because I see myself in their actions. If I had lived back then and had been a religious leader, I might have been there in the spotlight with them. I know I can be a hypocrite, preaching one thing and doing another. I can have one standard for others and another for myself. I can go through all of the right motions as a religious leader, after all, that's what I am paid to do.

If you look closely, do you see yourself there in the spotlight with them? If so, then along with yours truly, confess your attitudes and actions which are clearly hypocritical and judgmental. Humble yourself before God realizing that all of us are in desperate need of the forgiveness which Jesus attained for us on the cross.

## **THE SECOND PLAYER IN THE SPOTLIGHT IS THE ROMAN GOVERNOR, PILATE.**

When we really understand the plot of the drama, we quickly realize that Pilate is in a bind; a horribly tough place. Israel was a troubled country and never one's first choice for a tour of duty as a soldier or a governor. The first Roman governor had been sent to maintain peace and rule over Israel in AD 6. Pilate's term of office was from 26-35 AD.

If the truth be known, Pilate was a failure as a governor. It all started at the very beginning of his term of office on his first visit to Jerusalem. While he knew the Jews were "hyper" about having graven images of gods anywhere in sight, he didn't want to follow their custom of other governors who had removed the image of the emperor from the top of the standards which were paraded proudly before each detachment of soldiers. Callously wanting to make a statement and accent his power, he was adamant about leaving the little bust of Caesar on the top of each standard.

As might be expected, the Jews were livid and followed Pilate and his soldiers wherever they would go. Finally, he threatened those who were following him around. Very demonstrably, they simply "bared" their necks as if to say "bring it on." They had called his bluff.

On another occasion, Pilate settled the problem of an inadequate water supply in Jerusalem by building an aqueduct, for which the Romans were famous. While at first blush that seems noble, there was an outrage when it was discovered that he had taken the money to finance the project out of their Temple treasury. The people rioted out of their resentment for Pilate's cavalier action. He had several of his soldiers in plain clothes mingle among the people with clubs or swords under their cloaks. At a given signal, their weapons came out and clubbed or stabbed to death several in the frenzied.

In another incident, as a kind of power play, Pilate had certain shields made for his soldiers with the name of Tiberius Caesar inscribed on them. The people pleaded with Pilate to remove the inscription. Stubbornly, he refused. The people appealed to Caesar who quickly ordered Pilate remove them. One more complaint and Pilate would lose his office.

So you see as the courtroom drama unfolds and Pilate finds nothing wrong with Jesus, he is in a tough spot. Certainly, he would like nothing more than to further infuriate these "hothead" religious leaders by releasing Jesus. Yet, Pilate knows that he is on shaky ground and would be committing political suicide if he let Jesus go. In essence, Pilate is being blackmailed.

The great British Bible Scholar, William Barclay, puts it this way when he writes about our man in the spotlight, Pilate:

"On that day in Jerusalem, Pilate's past rose up to haunt him.... He wanted to do the right thing, but he did not have the courage to defy the Jews and do it. He crucified Jesus in order to keep his job."

Do you see yourself on the stage in the spotlight in the person of Pilate? I must admit, sometimes, I do. Maybe we do what is politically correct or expedient and not what we know to be the right thing to do. Sometimes we are more concerned about impressing or pleasing people than we are about pleasing God.

If you see yourself in Pilate, then, once again, you can confess the attitudes and actions which might cause you to cave in and not stand tall for what you know to be true.

### **THE LAST PERSON IN THE SPOTLIGHT IS JESUS.**

This man in the spotlight is a man's man. He was a rugged outdoorsman, a carpenter by trade who worked hard. He's been blind-folded, slapped, spat upon and cursed. The cruel Roman soldiers, in the middle of the courtroom drama, beat him mercilessly so that his back is raw. Ruthlessly, they made a crown out of thorns and forced it down on His head. They have mocked him sarcastically shouting, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Pilate had all of this done, hoping this would satisfy the blood-thirsty crowd so that he could then release Jesus.

Listen closely to what the great Dorothy Sayres writes about this Jesus and his strength and prowess:

"The dogma we find so dull—this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and the hero—if this is dull, then what, in Heaven's name, is worthy to be called exciting? The people who hanged Jesus, never, to do them justice, accused Him of being a bore—on the contrary, they thought Him too dynamic to be safe.

It has been left for later generations to muffle up the shattering personality and surround Him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws from the Lion of Judah, certified Him 'meek and mild,' and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. Those who knew Him, however... objected to Him as a dangerous firebrand."

From the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the Passover meal and the Last Supper in the upper room to the betrayal of Judas in Gethsemane to that moment before Pilate, Jesus was in control. That was never more evident than when we saw Him before the mafia don, Annas, last week in the passage just before this one.

Notice, even with His life on the line, Jesus has the courage to answer Pilate's first question about whether He was the King of the Jews, with another question, "Are you asking this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" This certainly wasn't the response Pilate was expecting. Deep down, he must have admired Jesus's courage.

Quickly, Pilate counters with, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Jesus answers that His kingdom is not of this world. If it were true, His followers would have been fighting to defend Him. Again, He makes it clear that His kingdom is not from here on this earth.

Not understanding, Pilate tries to track with Jesus by asking, "So you are a king?"

Jesus responds by saying that Pilate has said so. He goes on to say that His whole purpose is to testify to the truth. Anyone who listens to His voice listens to the truth.

Then Pilate asks the questions which has continued to ring down through the halls of time, "What is truth?" Little did Pilate know that he was facing the One who claimed to be the way, the truth and the

life. He was trying the One who was sent as God's highest revelation, the zenith of God's Divine Self-Disclosure.

Carol Tharp in a letter to the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* references Pilate's question as she ponders the world in which we live today:

"Western culture has made a foundational change in its religious base. We have exchanged the One who said, 'I am the Truth' (John 14:6) for the incredibly expensive doctrine of Freud and words of all his various disciples. Our new religion says with Pilate, 'What is truth?' and teaches our status as is one of 'original victim' rather than 'original sin.'"

As you look at this Jesus in the spotlight, do you want to know Him better? Do you want to walk with Him through prayer, Bible study, worship, and service on a day by day basis? Do you want to practice His presence so that continually you are asking not only, "What would Jesus do?" but also desiring to "Do what Jesus did"?

## **APPLICATION**

The drama comes to an end and the spotlights go out. We know the "rest of the story." Jesus was crucified on a cruel grotesque cross, emptying His life for us and our forgiveness. He was buried in a borrowed grave. But on Sunday morning He was raised triumphantly from death to everlasting life. It is in this Jesus that we place our ultimate trust, making Him our Savior and Lord. It's in this Jesus that we discover the truth about ourselves and the truth about God's unconditional, gracious love for us.

Like Pilate, people in our world are asking the question, "What is truth?" When we see Jesus, in stark contrast to ourselves and the stuff of this world, we see Truth. While Jesus as the Truth vividly shows how far we fall short of God's expectations for us, we know where we really stand. In the midst of our helplessness, He reaches out to us in love and grace wanting to bring us forgiveness for our past, peace, joy, and meaning in the present and hope for our future. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, He wants to be your ever-present companion in this journey of life.

In answer to Pilate's question, have you experienced Jesus as the truth for your life? Or, have you looked in other places which may feel easier and seem less costly?

Pastor and author, John Ortberg, uses this marvelous illustration when talking about truth:

Imagine picking up your car from the shop after a routine tune-up and the technician says, "This car is in great shape. Clearly you have an automotive genius to take care of your car." ... Later that day your brakes fail.

You go back to the shop, and you say, "Why didn't you tell me?" The technician replies, "Well I didn't want you to feel bad. Plus to be honest, I was afraid you might get upset with me. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted." You're furious! You say, "I didn't come here for a little fantasy-based ego boost. When it comes to my car, I want the truth."

Or imagine going to your doctor's office for a check-up. The doctor says to you, "You are a magnificent physical specimen. You have the body of an Olympian. You are to be congratulated." Later in the day while climbing the stairs, your heart gives out. You find out

later your arteries were so clogged that you were, like, one jelly doughnut away from the grim reaper.

You go back to the doctor and say, "Why didn't you tell me?" The doctor says, "Well, I knew your body is in worse shape than the Pillsbury doughboy, but if I tell people stuff like that, they get offended. It's bad for business. They don't come back. I want us to be a safe place where people feel loved and accepted." You'd be furious! You'd say, "Doctor, when it comes to my body, I want to know the truth!"

Obviously, when something matters to us, we do not want illusory comfort based on pain avoidance. We want truth.

Dear friends, Jesus is the Truth. He has not glossed over the human condition. He was blunt and honest. Yet, He came to be our Way to forgiveness if we repent and confess our sins. He came to bring us Life that is abundant and everlasting. If you would like for someone to talk about what it means to accept this gift of Truth in Jesus and/or would like to pray with someone, there will be members of our prayer team in the little alcove over by the cross when our time together is completed.

As we count down to the cross, celebrate the extent to which God was willing to go to point you and me to the Truth.